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A Possible Love between a Master and a Slave

Annette Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family*. New York, W. W. Norton & Company. 2008. 798 pages.

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Thomas Jefferson, a founding father and an enlightened sage, is one of the most respected presidents and perhaps the most fascinating yet puzzling figure in the history of the United States. Over decades, a horde of historians and biographers have thoroughly scrutinized a number of complex aspects of Jefferson's life that have often caused intense controversies. *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* by Annette Gordon-Reed is, in brief, an ambitious book dealing with the dark side of Jefferson with respect to the unknown history of three generations of an enslaved family, the Hemingses. With an extensive study of thousands of documents and oral narratives, the book recounts how the Hemingses were involved in

and developed a complicated relationship with the third president of the U.S. at Monticello, from the birth of Elizabeth Hemings in 1735 to what happened to her descendants after Jefferson's death in 1826.

Gordon-Reed's focal point, however, is still on the alleged intimate relationship between Jefferson and Sally Hemings, Elizabeth's youngest daughter. There is a long-standing controversy as to whether Sally's six children were fathered by the president, an issue on which the author sheds a new light in her previous sensational work, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (1997). Now that the controversy has been partially settled by a DNA study from 1998, which demonstrated a match between a descendant of the Jefferson male line and a descendant of Easton Hemings, Sally's youngest son, the author delves further into the relationship, suggesting that the master-slave sexual relationship was a consensual one based on "love" (367). With an in-depth discussion of how the liaison began during their stay in Paris in 1789, when Jefferson was serving as the U.S. ambassador to France, and how it developed into a life-long relationship, the author carefully observes some crucial factors—law and social status surrounding interracial relationships at the turn of the eighteenth century, relations between older men and younger women, and the personal attributes of Jefferson. Not surprisingly, as to the specifics of how the Jefferson-Hemings relationship started and developed, and of the feelings the two individuals may have had toward each other, Gordon-Reed, as many historians do, often relies on her own abstract reasoning or imagination, simply because of "the absence of words" (316). Also, she draws from the specific contexts of slavery and

social circumstances at that time in order to compensate for the lack of objective evidence.

First, Gordon-Reed underscores the fact that because Virginia law did not apply in Paris, where Sally was defined as free, the master-slave relationship between Jefferson and Sally would have changed accordingly; when the two lived in Paris, the status of Jefferson as a master was greatly weakened, while Sally's free status was increased. The author also observes that their relationship could have begun with the possibility that Jefferson functioned as a father figure for young Sally: "There is always a great danger of their sliding out of the quasi-father/daughter configuration into the role of lovers or potential spouses" (296). Importantly, she notes that Sally was not only a "bright" mulatto who resembled the race of Jefferson. She was also a half-sister of Jefferson's deceased wife, Martha Wayles Jefferson, which made their relationship complicated but predictable. Because Sally might have resembled Martha in many respects, and because it had been seven years after Martha's death by the time they went to Paris, it is likely that Jefferson was so emotionally attracted to Sally that he considered her a future mistress. Lastly, Gordon-Reed points to "Jefferson's overall easiness of manner with people" and his encounter with Sally, which would have been "smooth and even" (269); Jefferson was an affable, charming, peace-loving, and promise-keeping person, and Sally probably trusted in his seemingly positive attitude.

Drawing from these assumptions, Gordon-Reed asserts that it is doubtful that Sally never loved her master, Jefferson, and vice-versa. She writes, "The difference between being forced, physically or

psychologically, by a man and being charmed by him would have made all the difference in the world” to Sally (320). As for Jefferson, the author quotes one of Jefferson’s great-granddaughters; Jefferson “loved her dearly” (372). For Gordon-Reed, there is a prejudice of modern eyes against the Jefferson-Hemings relationship; since the sexuality of enslaved African American women was inherently and perpetually degraded within slavery, modern observers tend to think that it is highly unlikely that there was love or romance between master and slave; acknowledging love in a master-slave relationship can be a powerful excuse for slavery. She observes that modern people usually have “the idea that Sally Hemings, an enslaved woman, was simply too indelibly degraded to be considered ‘lovable’ by a man like Jefferson, and that Jefferson, a slave owner, was simply too implacably evil for Hemings to have loved” (354). This reasoning leads to a conclusion that the Jefferson-Hemings sexual relationship may have involved love. Indeed, the author’s argument is provocative but plausible. It is not unlikely, as she observes, that an enslaved woman would have consensual sex with a master who is kind and affable, a relationship that actually resulted in many mixed-blood people (e.g. mulatto, quadroon, or octoroon) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Nevertheless, Gordon-Reed’s envisaging the puzzling Jefferson-Hemings relationship as based on “authentic” love raises many questions that undermine her efforts to rescue Sally from the silence of history, thus requiring further, careful discussion. Even if she speculates on many other forms of master-slave relations of the time, the author seems to understand the relationship only in terms of a

binary opposition: love or rape. Yet, just as the relationship does not necessarily imply sexual exploitation, as the author believes, it does not necessarily involve romance. Likewise, suggesting that the Jefferson-Hemings relationship was a long-term sexual one does not necessarily mean that Sally's sexuality was as degraded as that of other contemporary enslaved women. Unless it was a forced rape or unwilling sex regularly perpetrated by an evil master, much like the case of Robert Newsom and Celia in 1855, it was quite possible for an enslaved woman to have a sexual relationship based on mutual consent with her master.

The likelihood of negotiation between a master and a slave woman for their consensual sex is compelling. Notably, Madison Hemings, Sally Hemings's son, employed the terms "treaty" and "concubine" in describing what happened in Paris between Jefferson and Hemings (106). The two words, put together, offer no indication of love or romance. Rather, they indicate something political, somewhere in between love and rape, in which a couple seeks improvements from each other. Sally may have negotiated for the "manumission" of their children at her own expense; Jefferson freed their three sons, Eston, John, and Madison Hemings, before he died in 1826, while he never did it for Sally. As the author herself argues, the sex of Sally and Mary Hemings, Sally's oldest sibling who became a common law wife of Thomas Bell, with their masters was rather strategic as "their own way" to achieve "exactly what they wanted" (324): the freedom of their family and future children. It was not unheard of for a slave woman in nineteenth century to use white men for her own goal; a well-known case is Harriet Ann Jacobs in North Carolina, author of

autobiographical novel *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), who formed a consensual “love” with a white lawyer, Samuel Sawyer, in order to ward off her owner, Dr. James Norcom who sexually harassed her for years.

For Jefferson too, sex with Sally would not have had to involve either love or rape. Had Jefferson been such a rational, practical, conscientious kind of person who was always scrupulous about his reputation, living a perfect double life between the private and the public, he could well have managed to manipulate Sally without resorting to the binarism of love vs. rape. Jefferson, as Gordon-Reed describes, was *tactical* enough in dealing with his slaves to get what he wanted from them—voluntary obedience, loyalty, and affection. By appealing to his slaves’ emotions and by “doing things to make them feel bound and grateful to him” (303), he developed and maintained his own ways to be dominant. Such a characterization of Thomas Jefferson, therefore, is useful for the author’s argument that Jefferson was psychologically coercive enough to persuade Sally Hemings to be his mistress. A challenging question arises: could such a civilized and tactical slaveholder truly have fallen and remained “in love” with one of his slaves?

In attempting to answer this question, Gordon-Reed employs rather conceptual terms such as “universality” or “commonality” regarding the man-woman relationship, engaging in deductive reasoning. For instance, she contends that Jefferson and Sally should not be thought of as “living in different universes” (312). Gordon-Reed, in that way, seems to believe that an emphasis on the universal emotion of human beings is the only way to avoid degrading Sally’s sexuality or

suggesting rape, and to restore her as an autonomous individual in history; to be a worthy and full-fledged individual, Sally should be presented as “falling in love.” Ironically, such reasoning makes the author overlook the simple “universal” fact that not everyone engaging in consensual sex falls in love. In fact, a slave woman falling in love with her master seems as implausible as Pocahontas’s alleged love for John Smith or John Rolfe, if not more so.

Jefferson’s articulation of his philosophy on African-Americans in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, some of which Gordon-Reed quotes, makes it more troubling to accept the alleged love of Jefferson for Sally. Jefferson articulates that white skin is more aesthetically attractive than black skin “because it enabled whites to blush and thus to display sincere emotions, ‘the expression of every passion’” (271). Here, that Sally Hemings had these kinds of attributes associated with white standards of beauty such as blushing and flowing hair, is rather suggestive. Furthermore, Jefferson, as a man of the American Enlightenment, maintained that mixed-race people were a better race than the 100 percent blacks. Jefferson said, as Gordon-Reed points out also, that the racial intermixture “brought on ‘improvement[s] in body and mind’ of black people” (272).

Jefferson’s theory of an improved race works within the binarism between the civilized and the uncivilized that excuses the domination of whites with regard to slavery and colonialism. The same idea may have applied to possessing Sally, a young pretty slave girl, as his “concubine”; there is no difference between Jefferson, who loved “beautiful things” based on a white standard of beauty and accordingly selected Sally as a mistress for his future life, and a

master, who chose his best quality of “things,” slaves, for his business at a slave auction. For him, Sally, as merely a kind of improved race produced by the intermixture of whites and blacks, may have been nothing but the best item on the market. It is likely that he desired her beautiful, enslaved body, not loving her as a whole free human. This still implies a one-sided domination in consensual sex, if not unwilling rape, something always possible within slavery.

As for Sally, Gordon-Reed seems to overestimate her ability to judge in order to dismiss the possibility of rape. She argues that in Paris, Sally “thought rationally about her situation and came to a conclusion” and “could speak to Jefferson in a different voice” (362), as the slave girl would have been aware of the revolutionary atmosphere in the city regarding slavery. Perhaps, that is why Sally boldly declared that she would remain in Paris, and that resulted in Jefferson’s “solemn pledge that her children should be freed at the age of twenty-one years” (326). However, no matter how “intelligent” she may have been (259), Sally was only sixteen at that time in Paris when she was first pregnant with Jefferson’s child, while Jefferson was forty-six. The young girl must have been bewildered by the situation, and perhaps she could not help but opt for the “treaty.”

According to her son Madison Hemings, Sally had been clearly aware of what returning to Virginia would mean: being re-enslaved. If so, Sally could have chosen to remain in France to obtain freedom at any cost, because slaves could sue for their freedom in the French admiralty courts. But Sally finally agreed to return to Virginia with

Jefferson, solely relying on his “pledge.” Questions would arise. How could she have trusted him so? Was she willing to sacrifice her own freedom for that of her future children? Did she just love him so much that she simply relied on the “pledge?” We have no way of knowing, of course, yet Sally may have thought that only Jefferson “would be most able to end slavery for her children along with all the problems associated” with African Americans (337). This is not to say that her decision was naïve, but that her fate was completely dependent on Jefferson regardless of where she was simply because the master was still psychologically coercive and dominant in Paris, where Virginia law is ineffective.

The Jefferson-Hemings relationship reflects the fundamental nature of a master-slave relationship at that time, for “the idea of their love has no power to change the basic reality of slavery’s essential inhumanity” (365). Though there may have been a “treaty,” Jefferson controlled Sally’s thinking and decision making, so Sally returned to the status quo that the privileged white man maintained. As a result, the slave woman was never freed and remained silent in Monticello, a showcase of Jefferson’s version of slavery who was kept under perfect control until his death, and was often ridiculed as “Black Sal” by Jefferson’s enemies. If Jefferson had loved Sally so much, as Gordon-Reed suggests, that he would have willingly taken the risk of being publicly mocked, one would really wonder if he would have tried to leave some records of the relationship with Sally in any form that revealed his feelings toward her for generations to come. As we know, however, no documented information on Sally is available, which made her “mysterious” (657). Richard M. Johnson, a

war hero who became vice-president under Martin Van Buren, makes a comparable case; unlike Jefferson, Johnson lived openly with Julia Chinn, an octoroon slave he inherited, treating her as his common law wife, and even presented their daughters to white society in Kentucky. Of course, the simple comparison may not work. Still, that Jefferson was completely silent on Sally, while he allegedly “loved” her, is quite paradoxical, as he witnessed the revolutionary atmosphere in Paris. The older Jefferson, however, was somewhat reactionary. His overall stance on slavery, “underwent a subtle shift after his return from France,” and the young Jefferson “who had been very vocal . . . on the subject of emancipation, fell pretty much silent from his middle age on” (566).

In all, Gordon-Reed’s reading of the Jefferson-Hemings relationship as based on love is not so much effective at restoring Sally as an autonomous figure with agency as it is at highlighting the disturbing aspects of the third president of the U.S. Rather, *The Hemingses of Monticello* makes us understand Sally within the frame of colonialism in which the colonizer rescues the colonized in the name of civilization and freedom from savageness; in nineteenth-century America, Euroamericans coerced the colonized (e.g., the Native Americans) through treaties to assimilate them to white domination, thus confining the colonized within the “reservations,” where the history of the people was erased. If the word “treaty” from Madison Hemings’s testimony is valid, Monticello could be interpreted as another form of a reservation, where Jefferson erased the history of Sally in the name of the manumission of her children and under the guise of “the protection of his family” (639). Jefferson, an

enlightened person, who wrote of humans' immutable right to liberty in the "Declaration of Independence" for the American Revolution, freed only seven people in his life based on a "treaty" with his concubine, while many of his contemporaries, who were inspired by his writing, including some founding fathers like George Washington, manumitted their slaves during and after the Revolution. The existence of such a "treaty," as has been evidenced in numerous cases in nineteenth-century America, especially since Jefferson's era, is simply deception.

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Abstract

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This review introduces Annette Gordon-Reed's *The Hemingses of Monticello* critically. The book recounts the extended history of three generations of the Hemingses and the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and them that developed at Monticello between 1735 and 1826. The author, however, questions the suggested sexual relationship between Jefferson and Sally Hemings, Elizabeth's youngest daughter, as to whether Sally's six children were fathered by the president, a long-standing controversy since the turn of the eighteenth century. The discussion of the specific contexts of slavery and of social circumstance at that time makes the author's argument in the book convincing and thought-provoking. Gordon-Reed's view of the Jefferson-Hemings relationship as based on love, however, often relies on her own abstract reasoning, which creates many questionable points. Such factors overshadow the author's efforts to recover Hemings from the silence of history while ironically emphasizing Jefferson's hegemony over her.

Key Words

Thomas Jefferson, Sally Hemings, slavery, master-slave relationship, consensual sex, love